

MOTION BY SUPERVISORS KUEHL AND
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Several studies have shown that 90 percent of brain development in children occurs before age 5.¹ Early childhood is, therefore, a critical developmental period for children. Many young children involved in the child welfare system do not have access to the early care and education services that help stabilize families and build a solid foundation for a child's future. This lack can lead to an increased risk for an array of poor outcomes, including developmental delays, low academic achievement, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, socio-emotional issues and adult criminal behavior. Fortunately, high quality early learning programs can help reverse or decrease these trends.²

Under current law, priority enrollment in State child care and development services is given to abused or neglected children who are receiving child protective services (CPS), or children at risk of abuse and neglect. It seems clear that all children under Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) supervision should thus, be categorically eligible and prioritized. Unfortunately, however, the vast majority are not

¹ First 5 California: <http://www.ccfc.ca.gov/parents/learning-center.aspx?id=9>.

² Vazquez, Angela (2013). *Early Care and Education Access for Maltreated Children in LA County*. Advancement Project.

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receiving these services due to vague and confusing policies. For instance, Education Code sections have been interpreted to *exclude* children when they are removed from their parents and placed into foster care, including those formally placed with relatives. Paradoxically, children under child welfare jurisdiction oftentimes lose their eligibility and priority for subsidized child care when they are formally placed into foster care despite significant and unmitigated risk factors.³ As a result, in October 2011 only 12.8 percent, or 1,509 children of the DCFS caseload under age five were receiving early education services.⁴

The child welfare and early education systems must work together to ensure the well-being of the most at-risk children by increasing their access to early care and education services. According to the Blue Ribbon Commission on Child Protection, “All children under supervision of DCFS between 0-5 should be prioritized for access to Early Childhood Education learning programs.”⁵ In response to similar confusion around enrollment criteria, the federal Department of Health and Human Services recently issued guidelines to ensure foster children are enrolled in Head Start services. With the Local Control Funding Formula, in 2013, California became the first state in the nation to provide additional resources to school districts to improve the education outcomes of students in foster care. A similar alignment of the State’s priorities across all California Department of Education efforts is key to fully leveraging this historic investment.

From a research and policy perspective, we know that neglect is, by far, the primary reason young children enter the child welfare system.⁶ If a child is removed from the home due to abuse or neglect, children are further traumatized through disrupted

³ Vazquez.

⁴ Vazquez, Angela (2013). *Early Care & Education Rates are Low for Maltreated Children in LA County*. Advancement Project.

⁵ *The Road to Safety for our Children*, Blue Ribbon Commission on Child Protection, April 19, 2014, page 32.

⁶ *First Entries into Foster Care by Reason for Removal, 2011-13*, www.Kidsdata.org, Lucille Packard Foundation for Children’s Health.

relationships and the toxic stress of environmental instability. It is not, therefore, surprising that children in the child welfare system are five times more likely to have developmental delays than children in the general population. According to the Advancement Project, “neuroscience research demonstrates how initial experiences provide scaffolding for later development... Consistent dependable adults help children learn about their environments and how to manage stress before it accumulates and harms the development of young brains.”⁷ High quality early learning can positively change a child’s life course.

From a programmatic perspective, Los Angeles County has a great need to recruit more foster parents, particularly for children under 5. The bed shortage is especially acute for infants, partly because of the significant gap between the cost of fully caring for these children and what the State pays families. As the landscape of foster parents evolves to include more working families, access to child care is crucial to finding a home for these young children. According to focus groups conducted by DCFS, child care is one of the top three barriers to placing children under age 5. Furthermore, support to foster homes is a necessary precursor in the State’s Continuum of Care Reform effort to reduce the use of institutional care settings.

Finally, there is a significant need to provide access to child care for those at-risk children whose young parents are under DCFS supervision (pregnant and parenting teens) and who aging out of foster care, including 282 young children whose parents are currently under DCFS supervision. Young adults with a history of maltreatment are more likely to experience poverty, unemployment and be investigated for abuse or neglect of their own children.⁸ To break the cycle of dependency and ensure self-

⁷ Vazquez.

⁸ Putnam-Hornstein, E, Needell, B, Cederbaum, J, King, B. *California’s Most Vulnerable Parents: When Maltreated Children have Children*, Children’s Data Network, University of Southern California, November 2013.

sufficiency, these parenting foster youth should also be prioritized for State subsidized early education services.

WE, THEREFORE, MOVE that the Board of Supervisors direct the Interim Chief Executive Office to: (1) work with our Sacramento advocates to support or pursue legislation to clarify existing law for State subsidized child development services, and (2) send a 5-signature letter to Governor Brown with copies to the County's Legislative Delegation, in support of such clarifying legislation. State law prioritizes neglected or abused children who are recipients of child protective services, or children who are at risk of being neglected or abused, and as such, clarification is needed to explicitly include foster children and children with parents who are under DCFS supervision.

S:GC/ECE for Foster Children